



Gaia goddess

Singer, actress and activist Olivia Newton-John is hopelessly devoted to making a positive impact from her public platform

Words CAROLINE ROBERTSON, Photography KATE NUTT, SHOT AT GAIA RETREAT & SPA



OMG, it's ONJ on the phone apologising because she's 15 minutes late. Nice to see Hollywood hasn't changed this Melbourne girl's manners. Despite her celeb status, singer and actress Olivia Newton-John remains an approachable superstar who makes time for others, often offering a meet-and-greet opportunity at her concerts.

At school, I remember boys calling her Olivia Neutron Bomb as her beauty blew them away. We loved her as the Aussie sweetheart Sandy in *Grease*, the roller-skating minx in *Xanadu* and the sweaty seductress in *Let's Get Physical*.

But Newton-John is so much more than a pretty face and a mesmerising voice. Beneath her beguiling smile and gentle demeanour shines a strong spirit that has conquered cancer once, steered a steady career and supported compassionate causes long before they were cool.

Newton-John has had an action-packed 68 years and shows no signs of slowing down. Recording, touring, acting and championing charities fully occupy her. "I enjoy it and it allows me to do other things, such as talking about the ONJ Cancer and Wellness Centre," she says of her most recent project.

From cancer to wellness

Since thriving through breast cancer in 1992, Newton-John wanted to share the therapies and hope that helped her with her crisis. "I bought homoeopathics from Germany, yoga, meditation, herbs from John [her now husband]. Looking back, I'm pleased I also went through chemo, so I have compassion for those undergoing it. But I also want to create kinder treatments that promote healing; keeping people's minds positive with complementary and conventional treatments all under one roof."

When Austin Health approached Newton-John to lend her support to



their Melbourne public hospital, she emphasised the importance of a wellness wing. "Putting the word 'wellness' next to 'cancer' gives it a whole different consciousness that you can go from cancer to wellness," she explains.

After nearly 10 years of fundraising close to AU\$200 million, the state-of-the-art Olivia Newton-John Cancer and Wellness Centre opened in 2012 in Heidelberg, Victoria. One way Newton-John garnered funds was with a three-week walk along the Great Wall of China, signifying the road to recovery from cancer.

Patients at the ONJ Centre have access to world-class cancer treatments, holistic therapies and expert specialists guiding them through their journey. Newton-John's efforts have made a huge impact on lives, as patients' testimonials highlight. Ian, who was treated for a brain tumour, says, "If the ONJ centre had not brought us into the sphere of these wonderful people, programs and facilitator, I hate to think what kind of state I'd be in now. While my recovery will never be complete, it has come so much further than I would have believed possible thanks to this amazing place and the superheroes that reside in it. This place is a priceless lifeline to so many."

Scientists at the centre are also making groundbreaking discoveries, including that a protein called HCK can suppress gastrointestinal tumours and reduce the emergence of new cancers.

Ever the optimist, Newton-John considers herself a thriver rather than a survivor. She isn't one to dwell on the past and laughs when saying she has to remind herself she had cancer. "My dream is that one day the ONJ Centre will be only about wellness, and we'll no longer need cancer centres because cancer will be a thing of the past." As the wellness wing depends on donations, anyone can assist by participating in the Wellness Walk, Research Run, fundraising or donating online (see p32).

Newton-John is also very proactive in promoting cancer prevention. Her Liv Breast self-exam kit enhances your touch 10-fold so you can feel lumps easily for early detection, she says. She has also crusaded for chemical awareness since her friend's five-year-old passed from cancer. "Nancy saw a correlation between environmental toxins and her daughter's condition. I became involved in getting things banned from being put in food and co-founded the Children's Health

Environmental Coalition." Newton-John prefers all organic produce and gave me the girly tip to only highlight hair to avoid chemicals seeping into the scalp.

The star's compassion extends to the environment and animals. She initiated National Tree Day in Australia, which has instigated the planting of over 10 million trees since 1992. Newton-John also co-founded One Tree Per Child with Jon Dee, an international school initiative encouraging every child under 10 to plant a tree. "I grew up with an awareness of nature," she recalls. "My mother was very conscious of nature and of not wasting things. I had a sister-in-law who made me very aware of trees. [And] I was always sensitive to animals, saving abandoned animals dumped near my house."

Grounding and reconnecting

Despite her hectic schedule, Newton-John stays grounded by enjoying time at

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her California ranch and northern NSW Australian retreat. "I love being at home with my husband and my animals. I have horses, chickens, a dog and a cat ... they keep me active." She calls her co-owned, 25-acre Gaia Retreat & Spa set in the hinterland of Byron Bay her "heart home".

"I visit Gaia annually to reconnect with the land, breathe in the magical air, renew, refresh and restore," says Newton-John, whose authentic, multi-award-winning spa celebrates its 12th anniversary this year. "Gaia, meaning spirit of Mother Earth, was a dream come true — it's my special place in the world," she adds. "I love the energy, the local, organic food, the staff and the incredibly nurturing treatments administered by warm and talented therapists."

Admiring Newton-John's glowing skin, sparkling eyes and vibrant energy, I want what she's having — because it's evidently working! ONJ swears by her certified organic skincare range, Retreatment Organics, owned by Gaia and produced locally. "I wash my face before bed, moisturise, exercise and eat well, all to help to maximise the amazing benefits of the Retreatment range."

What, then, does she eat? Some of Newton-John's delicious recipes appear in her cookbook *Livwise: Easy Recipes For*

A Healthy, Happy Life (Murdoch Books). As with many of her endeavours, profits from *Livwise* support the Olivia Newton-John Cancer and Wellness Centre.

Shunning plastic surgery, Newton-John embraces this pleasurable life stage. "Ageing is inevitable, so you need to have love and laughter in your life — your inner happiness is what shows most of all and I am the happiest I have ever been at this time in my life."

Burnishing that inner glow is her loving bond with her husband John Easterling, which is palpable — they're always touching or gazing at each other tenderly. Easterling is Newton-John's second husband, who helped her heal when her boyfriend Patrick McDermott disappeared during a boating trip in 2005.

Newton-John and Easterling were friends for 15 years before they became romantically involved in 2007, marrying in 2008 in a private Incan ceremony in

Peru. She gushes, "I never imagined I'd find the love of my life at 60 — and it gets better all the time. I feel very blessed. It is an amazing love story. I always tell my friends not to give up on finding love."

Easterling is a celebrity in his own right, famous for supporting Amazonian tribes and rainforest protection by promoting Amazonian herbal medicines. He and Newton-John share a passion for the Earth, philanthropy and natural health. "I've learned a lot from John. He's a very loving, generous, caring person. I learn about herbs and travel with a suitcase of his tonics to keep me healthy!"

Together, the couple educate others about the importance of preserving the planet by serving on the board of the ACEER Foundation (Amazon Center for Environmental Education and Research), which helps Amazonian tribes with education, awareness and indigenous rights.

"[John]'s incredibly smart and compassionate," adds Newton-John. "He says yes to everything; he says yes to life!" Luckily, Easterling also enjoys travelling, so they tend to go everywhere together.

An uplifting journey

Newton-John's own travels started at six when her family including German



mum, Welsh dad, elder brother and sister migrated from England to Australia. At 15, she started a girls' group called Sol Four, singing at her brother-in-law's cafe. Then in 1965, at only 16, she won a talent contest that took her back to England to scale a successful singing career.

Over the decades, Newton-John's melodic voice has sold around 100 million records, making her one of the world's bestselling music artists of all time. Her diverse musical path traversed the towns of rock, country, musicals, Christmas collections and even Eurovision.

This is one star that shines even brighter when sharing the spotlight. "I've always loved singing harmonies with others," she says. Newton-John has had many career highs in dynamic duets with partners Pat Carroll, Cliff Richard, Andy Gibb, John Denver, John Farnham, John Travolta, Barry Gibb and Delta Goodrem.

Recently, she released a remix of her hit *Magic* with her daughter Chloe Lattanzi called *You Have to Believe*, which topped the Billboard dance charts. Newton-John's pleased that Chloe is finding her unique voice and proud of her recovery from an eating disorder. Chloe is currently in Oregon building a medical marijuana business to assist cancer sufferers.

Songwriting is a therapeutic tool for both mother and daughter: "Music has always been my way of healing." Newton-John wrote the album *Warm and Tender* after Chloe's birth, *Gaia* after her breast cancer ordeal, *Indigo: Women of Song* after her mother passed, *Stronger Than Before* in 2005, *Grace and Gratitude* in 2010 and *Liv On* after the sudden death of her sister.

Want to know more?

Olivia Newton-John Cancer and Wellness Centre onjancercentre.org
Children's Health Environmental Coalition healthychild.org
Gaia Retreat & Spa gaiaretreat.com.au
Retreatment Organics retreatmentorganics.com
ACEER Foundation acceer.org

"*Liv On* is an album for people going through loss and grief. I'd written a song for my sister Rona, who died suddenly of a brain tumour. Then I collaborated with my friends Amy Sky and Beth Nielsen Chapman over six months to write the album. Both had firsthand experience of grief, as Beth has lost her husband and Amy lost her mother. The intention was to help people to live with loss by transforming grief into meaning."

The album is an uplifting, inspirational resource and includes beautiful songs such as *Sand and Water* and *Stone in my Pocket*. "When you first go through loss and grief, you feel like you are carrying a boulder," explains Newton-John. "The grief comes in waves. Sometimes it's a pebble. Sometimes it's a grain of sand. The stone in your pocket will always be with you but you will feel it differently."

Her concerts are cathartic experiences to let grief go, she says, and move on with gratitude for the gift of life. "In our society, we tend to brush loss under the rug, but talking about grief, crying about it, is part of the healing. There's no time limit on it."

In our shows, it's been wonderful to talk about our experiences and the audience shares theirs."

The uplifting message is clear in the lyrics to the title song, *Liv On*:

Brighter skies will come again
Cry the tears you cry
And then live on, live on
Love is all we leave when we are gone
... live on.

Newton-John's foray into acting skyrocketed with the 1978 box-office blockbuster *Grease*, the highest-grossing musical ever. Her many screen incarnations since include a goddess in *Xanadu* and *A Christmas Romance*.

Generosity and gratitude

In addition to a successful career, Newton-John has always contributed generously to causes. Sometimes it was at the cost of her commercial interests, as in 1978 when she cancelled a concert tour of Japan to protest dolphins slaughtered in tuna fishing nets.

This philanthropic nature, Newton-John emphasises, stems from her mother: "She taught me there's much more pleasure in giving than receiving. It's a really great feeling to help others."

Newton-John has been acknowledged for her work with the United Nations, American Red Cross, the Environmental Media Association, the Women's Guild of Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, the Rainforest Alliance and Concept Cure. She has also been awarded an OBE, the Order of Australia, inducted into the Australian Music Hall of Fame and declared Australia's "National Living Treasure".

What struck me most about this woman as we chatted, though, was that in the hard, shallow world of showbiz she has retained her soft, humble authenticity. She has this infectious positive presence, a loving Libran outlook that makes others utterly comfortable. Though Newton-John has suffered her share of lows and losses, her overriding optimism twinkles through.

She embodies the Hebrew meaning of Gaia, or conscious life. "I believe you create what you think, say and do. I consciously remember how fortunate I am; that I have so many opportunities."

Since this interview, Olivia has again been diagnosed with breast cancer. Please join us in sending her healing wishes.

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